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To the Editor:

Your editorials, news comments and letters on the quarantine of astronauts returning from the moon are addressed to a fascinating and important issue of public policy. Above all, they highlight the absurdity of the efforts now programmed as if they were intended to protect the earth from a tangible risk of global infection by lunar microbes.

In fact, no responsible official or scientific adviser believes there is such a risk. If there were, the response would have to be the cancellation of the entire manned lunar program. We would have to be able to destroy the "contraband" or send it back, measures which we do not contemplate for national heroes having accomplished an arduous and courageous feat.

It is impossible to say that the risk is, strictly, zero despite the fact that we have a great deal of information about the moon. It has no atmosphere, and under relatively close photographic observation shows no sign whatever of life. The theoretical risk is perhaps comparable to that of opening an oil well or bringing deep-sea cores to the surface of the earth. These materials are far more likely to carry exotic forms which have been separated by the main stream for millions of years. We face, and do not properly attend to, much larger risks in the importation of wild monkeys and other animals for use in preparing vaccines.

The quarantine exercise does have two functions: to protect the lunar samples from contamination by earthly materials, and as a dress-rehearsal for explorations of the planets. By pointing out the insuperable difficulties of managing the quarantine of planetary travelers, it may have done an invaluable service in our plans for the exploration of Mars.

Before we can properly plan how to protect the earth against possible infection from Mars, we would need the information from a much more detailed study of the planet by automated instruments than the Administration believed necessary for the Apollo program.

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